

An Open Letter to the Residents of Ottawa

I am writing to you today to share a broader perspective of why Council acted to restore confidence in the Ottawa Police Services Board at its Council meeting of Wednesday February 16th.

At the height of the combined OPS/OPP/RCMP operation to end the demonstration over the course of the past weekend, I declined to engage on this issue while residents of our city were still under a state of siege and while our men and women in uniform were braving numerous and volatile risks to bring the occupation to a peaceful end.

On Friday January 28, 2022, what was expected to be a short-lived and peaceful protest led by numerous groups of truckers started to arrive in Ottawa. Once it became clear that the convoy protests had morphed into a more permanent occupation of areas of the downtown core and the parliamentary precinct, the isolation people were already feeling due to the pandemic turned into justifiable fear because of the actions of these occupiers, and the municipal response to the occupation was severely criticized.

Many have weighed in on this occupation and I am certain that the various inquiries will shed light on the actors, funding and motives of this unprecedented occupation.

It is the job of elected officials to look at facts first, even - and perhaps especially when - public safety is at risk and public pressure and scrutiny are running high.

It is the job of elected officials to do the right thing even when the public isn't able to have all the information in front of it. The facts will come out fully with the inquiries, but here are some of the facts that have not yet been presented.

The Board and its former Chair addressed the immediate challenge of Peter Sloly's resignation by swiftly appointing Steve Bell to immediately assume the position of interim chief, providing the force with seamless leadership at a critical time of the occupation.

Chief Bell was an integral member of the Integrated Command and it was the right decision.

Had the Board then focused its energies on providing Interim Chief Steve Bell and the OPS with their confidence and support to continue the work to end the occupation as peacefully as possible, Council would have thanked them - and I would have been first in line.

But that is not what the Chair of the Board did. And, ultimately, it is not what the Board did.

The actions of Council with respect to the leadership of the Board were not personal. They were based on the very real and very necessary goal of providing the OPS with stable leadership and the ability to focus on the job at hand - ending the occupation.

Which took planning and dedication and a deep knowledge of our streets, our community, our police force, and our federal and provincial police partners.

There are things we are not able to talk about because of the nature of in camera meetings, but I believe that the facts that are known will show over time that the Board's pretext of needing to hire a new Police Chief DURING THE OCCUPATION to END THE OCCUPATION on the eve of the carefully planned and impressive operation that would end the occupation- during a hastily assembled one day governance debacle – does not and will not stand up to public scrutiny.

This move by the Board, at that particular moment in time, was an unprecedented and extraordinary period of risk to community safety. Up until this time, Deputy Chief Steve Bell was successfully working with the OPP and the RCMP through the recently formed integrated command structure.

Over the course of the occupation, the OPS Board chose to meet on numerous occasions and to monopolize the attention of the police's senior leadership team when their attention should have been entirely focused on their work to end the occupation. In total there were six public meetings and six in-camera meetings over the course of the occupation, even though the questions the public wanted answers for could not be discussed in public.

Those meetings, then, were used by the OPS Board Members to publicly pepper the chief and senior staff with questions that could not be answered. To what effect? I cannot think of one. Whatever it was, it was not accountability and it serve to undermine the public confidence in the police.

On Tuesday February 15, residents of Ottawa, learned that the Ottawa Police Services Board had convened a special in- camera meeting for 1.5 hrs.

On the 19th day of the occupation, the OPSB board held an in-camera meeting – neither Members of Council (who do not serve on the OPS Board) nor the general public knew what was being discussed.

At this meeting, Members of the Board were informed that Peter Sloly had resigned as Ottawa's Chief of Police. Neither the timeline nor the circumstances leading up to the Board receiving his resignation, or the conditions surrounding this resignation, are known to the public. I do not know them.

I do know that, at the same in-camera meeting, members of the OPS Board gave the Chair a Mandate to negotiate a contractual arrangement with a consulting firm located

in Waterloo. Under this contractual arrangement, a consulting services firm would be asked to take command of the OPS effective the week of February 21, 2022.

The Board was briefed that the Chair had, - in the course of the morning meeting of the OPS Board -- searched, identified, vetted and recruited a new Chief of Police – with zero public scrutiny.

To the best of my knowledge, no votes were taken, and no formal authority was delegated that would allow the Chair to finalize or execute this arrangement. In the course of the meeting, Board members seemed unsure what mandate the Chair had other than to undertake a search for an external Chief of Police.

Board members insist on the fact that the Board Chair did not seek delegated authority to execute a contract for a new Chief of Police nor were they briefed on the details or conditions of the contract.

A few hours later - In the afternoon of February 15 - the OPS Board reconvened in public at 3 p.m. and was briefed on Chief Sloly's departure and the appointment of Deputy Steve Bell to interim Chief.

On that same day, at 3:21 p.m. on February 15, the OPS Board issued a news release announcing that "Today, the Ottawa Police Services Board and Peter Sloly had reached a mutually agreed upon separation."

In the same release, it was announced that Deputy Chief Steve Bell would be Interim Chief until further notice.

The statement later went on to outline that "the Board is already at work to put in place a new command structure and will be appointing a new chief very soon".

This last statement created confusion with the public and elected officials. Some thought that this might mean that Deputy Chief Bell or another senior officer within the force might be asked to lead the force on a short-term basis or for the remainder of the term.

It would later be learned that – the Board Chair claimed to have been given delegated authority by the OPS Board to commence a recruitment process and in fact she had offered to hire a group of individuals to manage the Ottawa Police Service, on a sole sourced basis, without competition and in direct violation of the Board's commitment to public transparency and accountability.

It appeared that the OPS would have effectively three different Chiefs announced to be leaving or leading the organization in a single statement, which confused the public, OPS and Members of Council.

The Ottawa Police Services Board has never, in living memory, hired a new external Chief of Police without going through an open and transparent public search that included full and public disclosure. This practice goes back to pre-amalgamation Ottawa.

Never has a Chief been hired by the current or former City of Ottawa without having been subjected to the transparency, accountability and vetting requirements of an open and public search.

Council and the public have consistently been informed of and aware of previous search processes. In the last search process, I was advised of the outcome of the national search that had been undertaken in a fully open, public and transparent manner.

Ottawa City Council has a preponderant voice in the governance of the Board, and a duty and obligation to the public to be kept informed of the general governance actions of the OPS Board.

Further, over the course of the last year, commitments were made to the city's BIPOC community that they would be engaged in any meaningful discussions around changes to governance and leadership of the OPS Board.

And so, it came as a shock to many that the Board might be in the process of hiring a new Police Chief – in the midst of the occupation - without an open and transparent competition.

In the evening of February 15, 2022, the Chair of the Board wrote to the Mayor to offer a post-facto briefing on the Board's plans.

No briefing was offered to the Mayor or Members of Council before the Board's decision to plan, negotiate, deliver and vet a new Police Chief – a process that is claimed to have happened in the course of a 90 minute meeting of the OPS Board held on February 15.

A call was set up between Mayor Watson and the OPS Board Chair on Wednesday, February 16 at 10:15 a.m. both Mayor Watson and the OPS Chair were represented by a political staffer.

The Chair of the OPS board outlined the OPS Board's plan to hire a new Chief of Police, who would take charge of the Ottawa Police Service "next Monday" (February 21).

Mayor Watson shared the view that this would be enormously demoralizing and destabilizing for the Ottawa Police Service. After a few minutes of dialogue on the Board's approach, the Chair of the OPS Board told Mayor Watson that "If you won't support this, then I won't do it".

This was understood by all parties on the call to mean that the Board Chair had decided to not proceed with the execution of the contract.

As part of the exchange, the Chair of the Board told Mayor Watson that she had asked Deputy Chief Steve Bell, at the height of the occupation crisis, if he would do anything differently from his then boss Peter Sloly.

The Chair shared that then Deputy Chief Bell had declined to “outline what he would do differently” to end the occupation. This is akin to asking someone in a command and control organization to turn on their boss. Much to his credit, he did not.

The Chair of the Board then proceeded to undermine the Board’s acting appointment (“he’s not up for the job, we are helping him by giving him a couple of years”) at roughly the same time as the OPS, under the day to day command of then Deputy Chief Steve Bell, was starting to align with the RCMP and the OPP on how to best end the insurrection.

Allowing Chief Steve Bell to continue leading the ICC efforts, in partnership with the RCMP and OPP, appears to have played a determining role in bringing the occupation to a successful end with a minimum of violence and bloodshed.

These are the known facts. All of these facts, and I hope more, can be expected to come to light in the course of various inquiries.

At the end of his meeting with the Chair of the Board, Mayor Watson believed that a governance crisis had been averted until it was discovered that the Chair of the Board had decided to proceed with the execution of the contract for a new Chief of Police, despite the commitment made by the Chair of the OPS Board to the Mayor in the morning meeting.

Further, the Board chair undertook, after their meeting, to act in a manner inconsistent with her morning exchange with Mayor Watson by undertaking to lobby various members of Council to support the Chair’s decision to hire a new Chief of Police on a sole source basis and with no public competition.

At that point in time, Mayor Watson concluded that he had lost confidence in the Chair of the Board, and that he would support a motion to remove the Chair and to retake control of the OPS Board.

On Tuesday afternoon, Mayor Watson consulted with various members of Council. Most were shocked and angered that the Board would authorize the hiring of a new Chief in the middle of the occupation – meaning that the City would have had three Chiefs of Police in a span of 7 days – at a time when the Steve Bell was actively coordinating the response to end the occupation.

Members of Council provided the Board the following reasons for their loss of confidence in the OPS Board:

- The Board had already given Steve Bell the mandate to end the occupation, and the public was hoping and expecting to start seeing results to end the occupation;
- The State of Emergency and occupation of the City were deemed by members of Council to be the worst possible time to make a decision of this magnitude without any public consultation;
- Commitments had been made – and had then been violated - by members of Ottawa City Council and the OPS Board to engage the public in major decisions made by the board, including commitments made to the city's BIPOC community that they would have a voice in major decisions; and,
- Council has never in its history not been made aware of plans and the specific process under which a new Chief of Police is to be hired.

For these reasons, a number of Members of Council felt that they had lost confidence in the leadership of Chair specifically and in the Board more generally.

Despite efforts to paint this decision as “personal,” history and the facts will demonstrate that Council lost confidence in the Board's leadership, because of the ill-timed and extremely hastily executed process to hire a new Chief of Police in the midst of the occupation:

- in a manner that showed a complete disregard for how external Chiefs of Police have been historically hired in the City of Ottawa;
- In a manner entirely inconsistent with how the OPS Board and Ottawa City Council have worked together to keep the public informed of such major governance undertakings; and,
- In a manner most certain to undermine the Deputy Chief Steve Bell's recently granted mandate to work with the OPS and the RCMP and other police forces from across Canada to bring an end to the truck convoy occupation.

I have already informed residents of the City of Ottawa that I will not be running for office in the fall. I wish whomever the public trusts to be their next Mayor nothing but the best. My actions were based on the facts and my desire to ensure that the OPS and its leadership were able to focus on the operation to end the occupation.

When Members of Municipal Council are in leadership positions during the lead up to an election, Council has to be doubly careful that the levers of power are not being used by

individual members of Council in a way that either insulates them from controversy or allows them to act in an electoral manner that is clearly not in the public interest.

In this case, I believe that facts and time will demonstrate that the public interest was not well served by the hasty attempt to hire a new Chief of Police in the midst of the occupation, and that these decisions were likely inspired by electoral considerations more than public interest considerations.

I want to close by thanking the Ottawa Police and all their colleagues from the RCMP, the OPP and municipal police forces from across the country and all the municipal staff in Fire Service, Bylaw, Public Works and Social Services for their incredible work in ending the occupation.

Jim Watson

Mayor, City of Ottawa